

MIKE CAUSEY

THE FEDERAL DIARY

The Grass Isn't Greener for Federal Workers

Would you want your daughter to marry a government worker?

Consider the advantages:

- Steady work! True, except for the 40,000 or so jobs that disappeared over the past two years.

- Government workers can't be fired! Feds do last longer than baseball managers.

- But 9,000 U.S. aides have been canned (for economic reasons, not for losing records) since President Reagan took office.

- Government pay is super! That is gospel everywhere but Washington, D.C., where the average white-collar salary of about \$26,000 doesn't seem to be enough.

And outside Washington, a lot of the government's top-paid scientists, engineers and experts have been finding greener pastures in industry.

- U.S. pay goes up automatically! Yes, but not very high. Last year, feds were supposed to get an automatic 18 percent catch-up-with-industry raise. They got 4 percent. This year, according to government data, feds are due 22 percent. The president has proposed a zero increase.

- Government workers have great benefits, such as free insurance! No, that is another myth from beyond the Beltway.

Feds pay anywhere from \$400 to \$1,600 a year out-of-pocket for premiums. Rates have gone up more than 50 percent in the last two years. Benefits have been cut 16 percent.

- Congress treats the feds like pampered children! Not so much anymore. In the past few years, Congress reduced the size and frequency of retiree raises, and slapped the Medicare tax on feds in addition to their regular pension contributions.

- The government has a superior retirement system! It is one of the best. But it may not be that way for long.

- Congress is almost certain to put new federal workers under Social Security. It costs participants almost as much as the federal retirement system, but pays about one-third the retirement benefit.

- Government workers can retire

earlier than most people! True, but they better hurry. The president wants them to stick around until age 65. Could be that, in the future, industry retirees will make second careers in government.

- Federal programs never die! It just seems that way. New rules are in the works to make it easier to shift hundreds of small operations to the private sector without the tedious requirement of justifying whether it is a good idea.

- Public service is its own reward! Try buying a Big Mac with the reward money. Few firms can match a lot of the work the government does, or the facilities it has.

Unfortunately, a growing number of feds say they feel unloved by their bosses, misrepresented by the media and maligned by the public.

Granted, things are a lot better in Washington than in Detroit.

Health and Human Services isn't going the way of Braniff. What happened to Woolco, Memco and W.T. Grant won't happen to the Interior Department. Unlike McLouth Steel Corp., the Labor Department is here to stay.

So how come government workers are so touchy all of a sudden?

The serious attacks on pay and perks are relatively new to feds. They started with Jimmy Carter.

The old stuff, getting older all the time, is the assault on the integrity and ability of feds. Mid-career rules changes that seem more like punishment than reform; lawmakers blaming "bureaucrats" for stupid or confusing laws; politicians claiming they could whip inflation if GS 4 clerk-stenos weren't so greedy.

Come to think of it, once-timid bureaucrats are becoming a rather surly lot.

If the politicians keep beating up on them, our civil service could become a most uncivil service in short order.

If government is made unattractive enough, anybody who can get out will. And nobody who is any good will want in.

That is one way to shrink the size and cost of government. Maybe that is the plan.